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Conservatism: Analytically Reconsidered

Martin Beckstein and Francis Cheneval

This special issue is motivated by the observation that conservatism plays a marginal role in contemporary philosophy even though it appears to be of considerable importance in moral, social, and political reality. One reason for this neglect is that defenders of conservatism have often refrained from articulating their arguments in a language that is acceptable to and understandable by analytically trained philosophers. The contributions of this special issue show that conservatism can profitably be approached from the point of view of analytic philosophy. Many of them are indebted to Jerry Cohen's (2012) seminal paper on conservative value, which develops a sophisticated justification of what Michael Oakeshott (1991) called the disposition to be conservative.

In this vein, Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin contribute two important papers, by which they complete a 'trilogy' on conservatism, that is to say a series of papers that present three forms of conservatism: adjectival, practical, and nominal. While the mentioned authors dealt with adjectival conservatism in previous work (Brennan and Hamlin 2004), in their papers in this volume they analyze practical and nominal conservatism. Practical conservatism is an attitude involving an empirical claim about possible costs and risks of departure from a status quo that is interpreted as a convention-equilibrium. Such equilibria are highly difficult to plan and replicate, so that the process of change from the prevailing equilibrium to a desired, different though not yet established equilibrium necessarily occasions significant transition costs. Hence, practical conservatism develops a status quo argument against imprudent forms of change under circumstances of uncertainty or risk. Nominal conservatives hold specific values not recognized by others and they do so even under conditions of certainty. According to Brennan and Hamlin, these specific and substantive values attribute normative authority to an element of the status quo because it is an element of the status quo. More specifically, they argue that nominal conservatives attach particular value on things of positive basic value. The opposite does not apply. Conservatives do not attribute negative particular value to things of negative basic value, as this would make conservatism indistinguishable from radicalism. Equally, they do not, here and now, attribute positive particular value to things in the future. They just consider they might do so once they get there. In sum, this means that nominal conservatives either justify the status quo because they attribute a particular value to it or they necessarily need to remain silent.

There is a direct connection between this systematic point of Brennan and Hamlin and Vanessa Rampton's historical paper on the situation of conservatives in the context of czarist Russia before and after the first revolution. What disposition do conservatives adopt when they find little to no value attributable to the status quo and when a positive value in the future is merely expected and aspired to in societal action? Rampton shows that in such situations taking sides with forces of radical change is as difficult for conservatives as justifying a status quo. Under dire circumstances, when the status quo loses its value-aptness, nominal conservatism needs to go into a switch-off mode, as it can neither find value in the status quo nor in the radical change that is deemed necessary to overcome it. In all other circumstances nominal conservatism values the status quo for a particular reason not recognized by others.

Whereas Cohen took a stance on the incommensurability of particular and basic value, Brennan and Hamlin show that there are trade-offs and that the two kinds of value are broadly commensurable and can be integrated in consequentialist accounts. In a thoroughly argued contribution Nir Eyal and Emma Tiefflenbach show that whatever attitude toward incommensurability a true conservative may need to hold, that attitude does not imply any possible moral justification of a prohibition to trade incommensurable goods. Trading and pricing do not determine or express true value, they simply serve the purpose of matching offer and demand.

Again building on Cohen's work on particular value, Jonathan Pugh, Guy Kahane, and Julian Savulescu make the case for a moderate bioconservatism. They argue that conservatives have good reasons to develop a partiality-for-humanity argument against some forms of human enhancement. At the same time, however, they show that the human nature objection against enhancement technologies has difficulties to justify its claim of an intrinsic and 'cosmic' value of humankind. In particular, they clarify why the attribution of intrinsic value to the human species, as is popular among conservative voices in the debate over human enhancement, is in tension with the conservative image of humanity as the result of a contingent evolutionary process that has brought forward a feeble and fallible creature.

The remaining papers in this special issue primarily touch upon epistemological tenets of conservatism. Brennan and Hamlin's (2004) earlier work justified adjectival conservatism on the basis of feasibility considerations. The status quo can legitimately be granted normative authority by virtue of its being the status quo, because a risk-averse posture in relation to policy choice is reasonable under conditions of uncertainty. In response, one of us (Beckstein 2015) has questioned whether adjectival conservatism is a true form of conservatism if the word's meaning is to be retained with our understanding of the concept. Theoretically considered, uncertainty might qualify as one kind of contingent circumstance that may motivate persons of any substantive ideological creed to oppose change in the established institutional order. In his contribution, Kieron O'Hara attempts to remove these doubts. In contrast to Brennan and Hamlin, however, he defends adjectival conservatism on a skepticist epistemological basis, and argues that there is good reason to consider adjectival conservatism not just a legitimate qualifier of substantive ideologies (e.g. conservative liberalism), but conversely substantive ideologies the qualifiers of conservatism (liberal conservatism).

Interestingly, precisely epistemological considerations take Kristóf Nyíri away from the core meaning of conservatism as a status quo biased disposition, towards a notion of conservatism as a set of attitudes that favor real knowledge. By real knowledge Nyíri understands knowledge that is considered necessary and conducive toward the preservation of humankind, for which to acquire visualization plays an important role. Following this conception, one could see a common sense and realist bias as the distinctive feature of conservatism, as opposed to the status quo or safe-change bias. However, what it means to preserve humankind is not self-evident, not even to conservatives.

Taken together, the essays gathered here underscore that conservatism need not be treated as 'unspoken wisdom' and deserves greater attention in contemporary political philosophy. They present powerful arguments to justify status quo biases in politics and reveal their limits. Thus, we believe, the contributions in this special issue improve the philosophical understanding of conservatism, and serve as a good starting point for future research into the topic.

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